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PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE IN EFL STUDENT–FACULTY EMAIL WRITING: A CRITICAL REVIEW WITH IMPLICATIONS FOR UZBEKISTAN

Neyaskulova Rano
PhD student, School of Educational Studies, Universiti Sains Malaysia
English Language Instructor, INHA University in Tashkent
Email: ranotakhirovna@gmail.com
ORCID: 0009-0001-8608-7607
Doi: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22115127

Abstract: Academic email writing requires more than grammatical accuracy because students must choose language that fits the recipient, purpose, status relationship and level of imposition. This critical review examines pragmatic competence in EFL student–faculty email writing focusing on difficulties reported in previous research and their relevance to Uzbek higher education. International studies have primarily addressed request realization, politeness, mitigation, pragmatic transfer and contextual appropriateness (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007; Bou-Franch, 2013; Alsalem, 2024; López-Serrano, 2025). Uzbek evidence identifies L1 pragmatic transfer and request avoidance, in student–teacher emails (Shaitan & Zakhidova, 2021). Comparative research also reveals differences between English and Uzbek academic correspondence in the realization of politeness (Ibodilloyevna, n.d.). Local instructional studies indicate improvement following focused teaching or exposure to authentic materials (Rahmonaliyeva, 2025; Mamajonova, 2025). The review highlights the need for greater attention to pragmatic competence in academic email instruction within Uzbek higher education.

Keywords: academic email writing, pragmatic competence, EFL, politeness, pragmatic transfer, Uzbekistan

1. Introduction

Email has become a routine form of communication between university students and faculty. Students use it to seek clarification, request meetings, discuss deadlines, or ask for academic assistance. These messages are often brief, yet writing them appropriately involves decisions that extend beyond grammar. Students need to consider who will receive the message, what they want from that person, and how the request may affect the recipient. Pragmatic competence is therefore central to academic email communication. Shaitan and Zakhidova (2021) distinguish pragmalinguistic knowledge, which concerns the linguistic resources available for performing communicative functions, from sociopragmatic knowledge, which relates linguistic choices to a particular social context. A request may consequently be grammatically possible without being appropriate when addressed to a lecturer.

Much of the research on academic emails has concentrated on requests. Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) investigated how students formulated requests with different levels of imposition, paying particular attention to directness and modification. Bou-Franch (2013) examined formality together with pragmatic transfer. Alsalem (2024) analysed 50 authentic student-to-professor emails written by Saudi ESL learners. Conventionally indirect requests accounted for 58% of the requests, compared with 34% direct forms and 8% hints. These results complicate the assumption that EFL students' pragmatic difficulties can be explained simply by excessive directness.

The scope of research has gradually moved beyond request forms themselves. Alsalem (2024), for instance, considered how students addressed professors, framed their messages, and organized

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information. López-Serrano (2025) approached the issue through pragmatic awareness. Students did not always evaluate faculty-directed emails in the same way as university lecturers. Learners were more attentive to certain visible features of email framing, whereas lecturers gave greater weight to content moves associated with the imposition of a request. Ifadloh et al. (2025) provide further evidence that appropriate academic communication cannot be equated with linguistic accuracy. Some grammatically accurate emails still contained pragmatic problems involving requests, apologies, tone, or formal politeness. Correct English, in other words, does not necessarily produce an appropriate academic message.

This issue is particularly relevant to the Uzbek context. Shaitan and Zakhidova (2021) examined formal English emails written by first-year university students in Tashkent. Their analysis revealed cases of L1 pragmatic transfer. Some participants avoided expressing a request explicitly, while informal forms associated with digital communication appeared in messages addressed to a teacher. Comparative evidence provides a broader perspective. Ibodilloyevna (n.d.) analysed 200 academic emails, half in English and half in Uzbek, finding substantial differences in the linguistic realization of politeness. The English corpus contained 312 modal verbs compared with 47 in Uzbek; hedging expressions occurred 198 versus 62 times. A different pattern appeared for honorific or respectful forms of address, with 286 occurrences in Uzbek compared with 24 in English. Extended greetings or closings were similarly more frequent in Uzbek correspondence, at 214 compared with 56. The study documents different politeness patterns across the two corpora, although it does not establish that these differences necessarily result in pragmatic failure.

A further strand of Uzbek research concerns instruction. Rahmonaliyeva (2025) studied university students receiving task-based instruction in sociolinguistic competence. After ten weeks, the instructed group improved from 54.3% to 79.1%, while the comparison group increased from 55.6% to 63.5%. Particularly strong gains were reported for indirect requests, formal greetings or closings, polite refusals, and apologies. Mamajonova (2025) provides evidence closer to written communication. Sixty IT students participated in a study that included email-writing assessment. Both groups initially achieved approximately 150 points out of 450. Four weeks later, students exposed to authentic or multimodal materials reached approximately 350 points, whereas the textbook-only group remained near its original level. Neither study was devoted exclusively to student–faculty email pragmatics, so their findings need to be interpreted within their original scope.

The literature suggests that academic email competence involves more than mastery of conventional expressions. Students have to relate linguistic choices to status, purpose, imposition, and the expectations surrounding academic communication. International research has investigated these relationships from several perspectives, while the Uzbek evidence remains smaller and more varied in focus. Some local studies analyse email production directly; others address pragmatic instruction more broadly. A critical examination of this evidence can clarify what is currently established and, equally importantly, what remains uncertain in Uzbek higher education.

This review addresses three research questions:

RQ1. What aspects of pragmatic competence have been examined in research on EFL student–faculty email writing?

RQ2. What pragmatic difficulties have been identified in EFL students' academic email writing?

RQ3. What gaps in the existing evidence and pedagogical implications are relevant to the Uzbek EFL higher education context?

2. Literature Review and Methodology

3. 2.1 Pragmatic Competence in Academic Email Writing

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Research on academic email pragmatics has concentrated heavily on requests from students to faculty. These requests vary in purpose as well as the burden they place on the recipient. Biesenbach-Lucas (2007), for example, examined requests for appointments, feedback on written work, and deadline extensions. The analysis considered directness, request perspective, plus lexical or syntactic mitigation. Non-native students changed their strategies according to the degree of imposition, although differences remained in the range of pragmatic resources

3. Discussion

The reviewed evidence does not support a simple view of pragmatic difficulty as either excessive directness or insufficient politeness. Students may know conventional request forms yet still have difficulty deciding which form fits a particular academic situation. Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) found that non-native students adjusted their requests according to the degree of imposition. Conventionally indirect forms became more common as the burden of the request increased, although differences remained in the range of mitigation resources used. Alsalem (2024) reports a similar preference for conventional indirectness among Saudi ESL students: 58% of the requests fell into this category, compared with 34% direct requests and 8% hints. The problem, then, cannot be reduced to whether learners know how to make an indirect request. Their ability to select from available pragmatic resources according to the situation is also important.

This becomes clearer when linguistic accuracy is considered. Ifadloh et al. (2025) found pragmatic problems even in grammatically accurate emails. Difficulties occurred in requests or apologies, but they were also evident in tone and formal politeness. Pragmatic competence therefore concerns the relationship between a linguistic choice and the context in which that choice is made.

Learners may also interpret appropriateness differently from faculty members. López-Serrano (2025) found that students paid considerable attention to certain visible features of email framing, whereas lecturers were more sensitive to content moves connected with the imposition created by a request. They also considered whether the message left the recipient sufficient freedom not to comply. This distinction is significant because a student can follow recognizable email conventions without fully understanding their pragmatic purpose. The issue is not simply the presence of a greeting, closing, or polite expression. What matters is how the message manages the relationship between the student and the faculty member.

Pragmatic transfer makes this relationship more complex. Bou-Franch (2013) found L1 influence in students' patterns of formality, but their directness choices followed a different pattern. Conventionally indirect requests were closer to those of the British English group. First-language influence therefore varied according to the feature examined. A similar need for caution applies to the Uzbek evidence. Shaitan and Zakhidova (2021) identified pragmatic transfer in formal English emails written by first-year students. Some participants avoided stating a request explicitly; informal digital language also appeared in messages addressed to a teacher. The study involved only 30 students, however, so its findings describe the group examined rather than Uzbek university students as a whole.

The comparative study by Ibodilloyevna (n.d.) helps place these findings within a broader linguistic context. English academic emails contained substantially more modal verbs or hedging expressions, whereas Uzbek correspondence relied more heavily on honorific forms and extended greetings or closings. Specifically, 312 modal verbs were identified in the English corpus compared with 47 in Uzbek; hedges occurred 198 versus 62 times. Honorific or respectful forms showed the opposite pattern, with 286 occurrences in Uzbek compared with 24 in English. Extended greetings or closings appeared 214 times in Uzbek messages but only 56 times in English. These figures document different linguistic realizations of politeness. They do not show that Uzbek students necessarily

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transfer each of these features when writing in English, nor do they establish that cross-linguistic difference itself constitutes pragmatic failure.

Status is particularly visible in this comparison. Student-to-faculty messages contained more politeness markers than peer correspondence in both languages, with the highest concentration reported in Uzbek student–faculty emails. This finding reinforces the importance of the relationship between participants. Academic email pragmatics is shaped not only by what students want to communicate but also by whom they are addressing.

Instructional research offers evidence that pragmatic awareness can develop. López-Serrano (2025) reported a marked change after focused web-based instruction: recognition of the need for internal mitigation increased from 7% before instruction to 47.1% afterwards. Participants also became more attentive to inappropriate closings, incomplete address forms, or failure to acknowledge that a high-imposition request might not be fulfilled. This study is especially relevant because the intervention dealt directly with pragmatic awareness of email requests to faculty.

Evidence from Uzbekistan points in a similar direction, although the local studies have broader aims. Rahmonaliyeva (2025) reports that students receiving task-based instruction improved from 54.3% to 79.1% on measures of sociolinguistic competence. The comparison group increased from 55.6% to 63.5%. Gains were particularly evident in indirect requests, formal greetings or closings, polite refusals, and apologies. Mamajonova (2025) provides evidence closer to email writing. Students exposed to authentic or multimodal materials improved from approximately 150 to 350 points out of 450 on the email task, while the textbook-only group remained near its initial score. The author also reports difficulties involving register, speech-act realization, discourse structure, tone, audience awareness, and politeness. Neither study, however, tests an intervention devoted exclusively to pragmatic competence in English student–faculty emails.

The international and Uzbek evidence points to a common issue: knowing a polite expression is different from knowing when or how to use it. The Uzbek literature adds an important cross-linguistic perspective because English and Uzbek academic correspondence show different patterns in the realization of politeness. At the same time, the local evidence comes from different student populations, research designs, and instructional settings. Direct intervention research focused specifically on English student–faculty email pragmatics in Uzbekistan remains limited.

4. Results

4.1 Aspects of Pragmatic Competence Examined in EFL Academic Email Writing

The first research question asked which aspects of pragmatic competence have been investigated. Request realization clearly dominates the literature. Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) examined directness in relation to imposition, modification, and request perspective, while Bou-Franch (2013) considered how formality or pragmatic transfer shaped request behaviour. Alsalem (2024) placed requests within the wider organization of student-to-professor emails. Taken together, these studies treat pragmatic competence not as knowledge of a single polite form but as the ability to shape a request according to the academic situation.

The scope becomes wider in more recent research. Ifadloh et al. (2025) included apologies as well as requests, with formal politeness considered in relation to social distance or power. López-Serrano (2025) shifted attention from production toward pragmatic awareness by examining whether students recognized problems in faculty-directed emails. Uzbek studies address many of the same areas. Shaitan and Zakhidova (2021) focused on request realization, modification, directness, and pragmatic transfer, while Ibodilloyevna (n.d.) examined how politeness was realized across English and Uzbek academic correspondence.

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4.2 Pragmatic Difficulties Identified in Academic Email Writing

The second research question concerned the difficulties reported among EFL students. No single problem accounts for the findings. Learners may possess indirect request forms but use a narrower range of mitigation resources. They may recognize conventional features of an email without fully considering the degree of imposition or the recipient's position. In other cases, grammatical accuracy is achieved while pragmatic appropriateness remains problematic (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007; López-Serrano, 2025; Ifadloh et al., 2025).

The Uzbek evidence identifies several related difficulties. Shaitan and Zakhidova (2021) found pragmatic transfer, request avoidance, plus informal digital language in formal emails to a teacher. Mamajonova (2025) reports problems involving register, speech-act realization, discourse structure, tone, audience awareness, and politeness. The findings of Ibodilloyevna (n.d.) need to be distinguished from these studies because they document cross-linguistic differences rather than learner difficulties. English and Uzbek academic correspondence differed considerably in the linguistic resources used to express politeness, but the study does not establish those differences as errors.

4.3 Research Gaps and Pedagogical Implications for Uzbekistan

The third research question considered what the existing evidence supports for Uzbek higher education. Direct local research confirms that pragmatic issues occur in students' formal English emails, while comparative evidence shows that English and Uzbek academic correspondence draw on different resources for expressing politeness. Instructional research provides a further dimension. Rahmonaliyeva (2025) reports improvement following task-based sociolinguistic instruction, while Mamajonova (2025) found better email-writing performance among students exposed to authentic or multimodal materials. Shaitan and Zakhidova (2021) recommend explicit formal-email instruction supported by awareness-raising or noticing activities.

These findings do not establish one preferred model of academic email instruction for Uzbekistan. The studies differ in their participants, purposes, measures, and instructional settings. Some analyse emails directly; others examine broader sociolinguistic competence. The evidence also does not show whether the same pragmatic difficulties occur across different Uzbek universities, academic disciplines, or proficiency levels.

This leaves a narrower but important gap. Research has established the relevance of pragmatic competence to formal email writing in Uzbekistan, yet direct intervention studies devoted specifically to English student–faculty email communication remain limited. The current evidence supports explicit attention to pragmatics, but it does not yet determine which instructional approach is most effective for this particular communicative context. Bou-Franch (2013) approached the issue through formality and pragmatic transfer. The EFL participants frequently used conventionally indirect requests, but first-language influence did not appear uniformly. Their patterns of formality resembled those of their L1, whereas choices concerning directness were closer to those of the British English group.

Mitigation forms an important part of this research because the same communicative intention can be expressed with different degrees of force. Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) examined syntactic modification alongside lexical resources such as *please*, hedges, downtoners, understaters, or consultative devices. Request perspective was also considered. Students could formulate a request around themselves, the recipient, both participants, or without explicitly mentioning either party. These choices influence how a request is presented to a faculty member.

Academic email pragmatics is not limited to the request sentence itself. Alsalem (2024) analysed 50 authentic student-to-professor emails from Saudi ESL learners, examining forms of address, openings or closings, levels of directness, request strategies, then information sequencing.

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Conventionally indirect requests were the most frequent, accounting for 58% of the data. Direct requests represented 34%, while hints accounted for only 8%. The predominance of conventional indirectness shows why directness alone cannot provide a complete account of students' pragmatic competence.

A broader view appears in Ifadloh et al. (2025). Their analysis included requests, apologies, and formal politeness. Requests were considered in terms of directness plus modification, whereas apologies were examined through expressions of regret, responsibility, explanations, or offers of repair. Formal politeness covered features reflecting power or social distance. An important finding was that linguistic accuracy did not always correspond to pragmatic appropriateness. Grammatically accurate messages could still contain problems of tone or contextual suitability.

Learners' ability to recognize pragmatic problems represents another dimension. López-Serrano (2025) notes that pragmatic judgments have received less research attention than email production itself. When students' evaluations were compared with those of university lecturers, the two groups did not always identify the same problems. Learners tended to notice certain framing features, while lecturers were more sensitive to content moves related to the imposition created by a request or the recipient's freedom not to comply. This shifts the discussion from knowledge of particular expressions toward an understanding of how those expressions function within an academic relationship.

2.2 Evidence from the Uzbek Higher Education Context

The literature from Uzbekistan is smaller, although several studies now provide evidence relevant to academic email pragmatics. Shaitan and Zakhidova (2021) examined formal English emails written by 30 first-year university students who had not previously received explicit instruction in formal email writing. Their analysis focused on request realization, directness, modification, and pragmatic transfer. Cases of L1 pragmatic transfer appeared in students' requests. Some participants avoided expressing the request explicitly; informal structures associated with social-media communication were also found in messages addressed to a teacher.

Ibodilloyevna (n.d.) provides a different perspective through a comparison of English and Uzbek academic correspondence. The corpus consisted of 200 authentic emails, equally divided between the two languages, from which 1,248 politeness markers were identified. The linguistic distribution differed considerably. English correspondence contained 312 modal verbs compared with 47 in Uzbek, while hedging expressions occurred 198 versus 62 times. Respectful address followed the opposite pattern: the Uzbek corpus contained 286 honorific or respectful forms compared with 24 in English. Extended greetings or closings occurred 214 times in Uzbek messages but only 56 times in the English corpus. At the broader level, positive politeness represented 56.8% of the strategies identified in Uzbek emails, whereas negative politeness accounted for 52.6% in English. These results document different ways of realizing politeness across the two corpora. They do not establish that the differences themselves constitute pragmatic failure.

Local research on instruction is broader in scope. Rahmonaliyeva (2025) studied 36 second-year English Philology students at Uzbekistan State World Languages University. One group received ten weeks of task-based instruction through situations that included making a request to a professor, refusing an invitation, or responding to culturally sensitive scenarios. Its mean score increased from 54.3% to 79.1%, compared with a rise from 55.6% to 63.5% in the conventional-instruction group. Particularly strong gains occurred in indirect requests, formal greetings or closings, polite refusals, and apologies. The study concerns sociolinguistic competence more broadly, however, rather than development in academic email writing alone.

Mamajonova (2025) moves closer to written communication because email writing formed part of the assessment. The study involved 60 IT students at Fergana State Technical University. Both

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groups initially scored approximately 150 points out of 450 on the email-writing task. Four weeks later, the group working with authentic or multimodal materials had reached approximately 350 points, whereas the textbook-only group remained near its initial result. The article also reports difficulties involving register, speech-act realization, discourse structure, tone, audience awareness, and politeness. Its inconsistent use of the terms *experimental* and *control* makes it safer to distinguish the groups by the type of instruction they received rather than by the labels used in parts of the paper.

Not all Uzbek publications provide direct empirical evidence. Tursunova (2024) discusses limitations associated with grammar-focused instruction, restricted pragmatic resources, and teacher preparation, proposing more explicit pragmatic teaching supported by context-sensitive materials. Matmuratova (2025) concentrates on functional email writing in the EFL classroom. Email simulations, model-text analysis, cultural comparison, plus attention to audience or tone are among the practices proposed. These publications contribute to the pedagogical discussion, but they should not be treated as direct evidence of students' pragmatic performance.

2.3 Methodology

This article adopts a critical review approach. The literature was selected for its relevance to pragmatic competence in EFL academic email communication, particularly interaction between students and faculty. Studies analysing email requests form the core of the review, while research on politeness, mitigation, pragmatic transfer, or judgments of appropriateness is included where it contributes directly to understanding this communicative setting.

A distinction was necessary when considering the Uzbek literature because the available studies differ substantially in focus. Research based on students' formal or academic emails was treated as direct evidence of email practices. Studies of broader pragmatic or sociolinguistic instruction were considered when examining pedagogical implications. Conceptual publications served only as supporting literature.

The studies were examined in relation to the three research questions rather than summarized one after another. International evidence was used to identify the major areas investigated in EFL academic email research; the Uzbek literature was then considered against this background without assuming that findings from other EFL contexts also characterize Uzbek students. This review does not claim systematic or exhaustive coverage of the literature, nor does it attempt a meta-analysis. Its purpose is narrower: to compare the selected evidence, identify points of convergence or difference, and determine what the existing studies can support specifically for Uzbek higher education.

5. Conclusion

This critical review examined pragmatic competence in EFL student–faculty email writing, with particular attention to Uzbek higher education. Across the international literature, request realization remains the most frequently investigated area. Studies have considered how students adjust directness to the level of imposition, soften requests through mitigation, or position themselves in relation to the recipient (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007; Bou-Franch, 2013; Alsalem, 2024). More recent research has widened this perspective by examining pragmatic awareness, email framing, apologies, and contextual appropriateness (Ifadloh et al., 2025; López-Serrano, 2025).

The findings suggest that pragmatic difficulty cannot be explained simply by a lack of polite language. Students may know conventionally indirect request forms but use them without sufficient sensitivity to the academic situation. Linguistic accuracy presents a similar problem. Ifadloh et al. (2025) found that grammatically accurate messages could still be pragmatically inappropriate. López-Serrano (2025) further showed that students and lecturers did not always judge faculty-directed emails in the same way. Pragmatic competence therefore depends on how linguistic resources are adapted to the recipient, purpose, and degree of imposition.

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The Uzbek evidence provides a more specific picture. Shaitan and Zakhidova (2021) identified pragmatic transfer, request avoidance, and informal digital language in formal student–teacher emails. Ibodilloyevna (n.d.) documents substantial differences between English and Uzbek academic correspondence. Modal verbs or hedging were considerably more frequent in the English corpus, whereas Uzbek messages contained far more honorific forms and extended greetings or closings. These differences demonstrate that politeness is not necessarily expressed through the same linguistic resources in the two contexts. They should not be interpreted as learner errors without direct evidence of transfer.

There is also some local evidence concerning instruction. Rahmonaliyeva (2025) reported improvement following task-based instruction in sociolinguistic competence, particularly in areas that included indirect requests and formal email framing. Mamajonova (2025) found greater improvement in email-writing performance among students who worked with authentic or multimodal materials than among those receiving textbook-based instruction. Neither study, however, was designed exclusively around pragmatic competence in student–faculty email communication.

The evidence for Uzbekistan therefore remains uneven. Direct email studies exist, but they represent a limited range of students and institutional settings. Broader instructional research provides useful support without answering all questions about academic email pragmatics. It is still unclear whether the difficulties reported in individual studies occur similarly across disciplines, proficiency levels, or universities.

Further research could address this gap by examining authentic English student–faculty emails from a wider range of Uzbek higher education settings. Intervention studies would also be needed to determine whether explicit pragmatic instruction improves students' email communication and which instructional practices produce such improvement.

Within the evidence currently available, one conclusion can be drawn with greater confidence: successful academic email writing cannot be reduced to grammatical correctness or the use of conventional polite expressions. Students need to understand how their linguistic choices function within an academic relationship. For Uzbek EFL instruction, this places pragmatic awareness alongside linguistic accuracy as an important part of effective student–faculty communication.

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